

# 'PANAMA GENERAL REPORTED TO RIG ELECTION IN 1984

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WASHINGTON, June 21 — The United States has assembled conclusive evidence showing that Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the military strongman of Panama, ordered the Panama Defense Force to intervene and overturn the results during the 1984 Presidential elections in Panama, according to Reagan Administration officials.

The officials said both the Central Intelligence Agency and secret analyses provided by the United States Embassy in Panama concluded that extensive vote fraud took place. A senior State Department official said there was "absolutely no question" the Defense Force's intervention came at the express order of General Noriega.

A White House official with direct knowledge of the situation in Panama similarly said C.I.A. field reports had painted a clear picture of the vote-stealing and had tied it directly to General Noriega. "I saw the original reports in the daily intelligence briefs," he said. "They were extremely accurate."

## Fraud During the Count

These United States officials, some of whom were serving in Panama at the time, said vote-stealing and fraudulent counting occurred after it became clear that Nicolás Ardito Barletta, the candidate supported by General Noriega and the Reagan Administration, was running behind Arnulfo Arias Madrid, the opposition candidate.

General Noriega is the commander of the Panama Defense Force, which at the time of the election was known as the national guard, and he is widely considered the politically dominant force in the nation.

The general was unavailable for comment on the charges of election rigging. Four telephone calls over two days to the army press office in Panama were not returned.

## Report to Senate Panel

Last month, according to first-hand sources, C.I.A. officials told a top-secret Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee hearing on Panama that Mr. Arias actually won the election by 30,000 votes. Shortly after the election, the United States Embassy initially concluded that Mr. Arias won by 25,000 votes, Administration officials said.

Despite the extensive information on vote fraud, American officials and diplomats said, Secretary of State George P. Shultz agreed to head the American delegation to Mr. Barletta's inauguration in October 1984. While there, Mr. Shultz publicly described Mr. Barletta's election as offering "Panamanians of all political persuasions a new opportunity for progress and national development."

Public charges of vote-stealing were made shortly after the election and continue to be made in Panama, but the official American Embassy position, as reported at the time of the election, was that the United States had received no evidence of fraud and had warned prior to the election that any attempt at vote-stealing could result in a cutoff of American aid to Panama.

## Barletta Is Forced Out

Mr. Barletta was forced out of office by General Noriega last fall after he agreed to establish an investigating commission to look into the torture and murder of Dr. Hugo Spadafora, a leading opponent of General Noriega's regime. The President's successor, Eric Arturo Delvalle, is viewed a figurehead, with General Noriega and the Defense Force retaining tight control.

In explaining the Administration's position two years ago on Panama, some officials pointed out that Washington had badly wanted an election. Panama had not held a Presidential election since 1968 and the Reagan Administration's overriding concern by the end of 1983, one official said, had been to find a candidate who would be acceptable both to Washington and to General Noriega and thus "get Panama back on the path of democratization" — a goal the Reagan Administration has declared to be its policy in many parts of Latin America.

"The only way to do that was to hold an election of some kind," the official said, "and not have someone appointed by the Defense Force run."

Mr. Barletta, an economist who had studied at the University of Chicago under Mr. Shultz in the 1960's, was known to have no special ties to the Defense Force. Reagan Administration officials acknowledged that he had been promoted and, before his official nomination, approved as a candidate by senior White House, Defense and State Department officers at meetings in Washington in late 1983 and early 1984. "One drawback," said a former White House official, "was that he was not a very good candidate" in terms of his ability to arouse popular support.

The highly popular Mr. Arias, then 82 years old and a staunch nationalist whom many in the United States Government considered anti-American, also ran a much tougher campaign than expected. Administration officials acknowledged, and there were intelligence reports indicating that General Noriega was prepared to steal the election through fraud. One American official acknowledged that he understood before the election that if necessary, as he put it, "the election would be phoned up a little bit."

Initially, intervention was not seen as necessary because a private poll conducted by the American Embassy had predicted a Barletta victory for the five-year term. But by Election Day, one official with first-hand knowledge said, it was obvious that there had been a groundswell of support for Mr. Arias, whose personal popularity was high.

## Voting Itself Appears Fair

The actual voting, American officials said, was relatively free of taint, but by nightfall the embassy had received reports that General Noriega had decided, as one American recalled, that something "had to be put together — and quickly." One of Mr. Noriega's first steps, officials said, was to order a halt in the counting of votes, triggering immediate suspicions and demonstration by Arias supporters.

The official said the Reagan Administration, having thrown its weight behind Mr. Barletta and recognizing that Mr. Noriega, the real power in Panama, would not tolerate Mr. Arias in the presidency, was left with few options. "If we had said, 'Don't phony it up and let Arnulfo win,' Noriega wouldn't have done it anyway," the official said.

Jack Hood Vaughn, who served as Ambassador to Panama in the Johnson Administration, observed the 1984 elections in Panama as an unofficial adviser and concluded, he said, "There is absolutely not the slightest doubt that it was stolen by the national guard." In many rural areas, Mr. Vaughn said, the national guard seized the ballot boxes after the election and kept them overnight.

"They had control," said Mr. Vaughn, who is now a Washington consultant, "and anything was possible."

After a two-week delay and amid intensified charges of fraud, Mr. Barletta was declared the winner by 1,713 votes out of 640,000 cast.

The deputy State Department spokesman, Charles E. Redman, when asked recently for comment, said that the United States was aware of the allegations of vote fraud from supporters of Mr. Arias, but that, without any independent evidence, "we had no basis to do anything other than accept the result of the Panamanian authorities."

"We were dealing with an independent, sovereign nation," he said.

Mr. Redman added that the State Department had received "a generally positive report" from an observer group that was in Panama to monitor the elections. "This was an exercise of the democratic process — whatever the shortcoming," he added.

American officials with first-hand knowledge took issue with Mr. Redman's claim that observer groups in Panama had reported that the election was free from taint. There were in fact two groups in Panama on Election Day, State Department officials acknowledged. One group, headed by William J. Jordan, who served as Ambassador to Panama from 1974 to 1978, concentrated its efforts on the relatively untainted voting itself and did not observe the subsequent vote counting.

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**'Many Things That Were Wrong'**

The second group of observers, organized by the Panamanian Human Rights Committee, included Mr. Vaughn. Another member of the group, the Rev. Robert F. Drinan, a former Democratic member of Congress from Massachusetts, agreed with Mr. Vaughn that extensive fraud was observed and reported to the American Embassy.

"We found many many things that were wrong," said Father Drinan, who is now a professor of law at Georgetown University. "It was filled with irregularities."

The third member of the observer group, Dr. Raymond G. Gastil of New York, editor of an annual yearbook on freedom, said he had similarly concluded that there was "fairly strong" evidence of "enough cheating to change the result of the election."

One American official who was serving in Panama at the time of the May 1984 election recalled that he and colleagues had expected and reported that there would be some vote fraud and many disputed ballots. "Fooling with voter lists and shifting a few ballot boxes are the tradition in Central America," he said. But General Noriega went much further, he said: "What was reprehensible was that the Defense Force recruited this goon squad to physically intimidate the electoral commission" that had the responsibility of auditing the vote count and pronouncing the winner.

**Gunfire During the Count**

At the time, there were published reports of a shooting incident in a plaza in front of the Legislative Palace, where election returns were being tabulated. Gunmen opened fire on a crowd of Arias supporters who were protesting suspected fraud, killing 2 people and wounding 40.

The American Embassy said it learned that the shooting had been started by men hastily recruited by the Panama Defense Force and assigned to terrorize the Arias supporters, State Department officials said.

American officials also learned, according to those on duty in Panama, that the gunmen were subsequently being hunted down, on the orders of General Noriega, and killed or imprisoned.

One of the gunmen fled to the French Embassy in Panama, an official recounted, and remained there for weeks, until the French could arrange for his safe passage. "He told them the whole story," the official said, "and we got it from them." A similar account was provided by officials at another

foreign embassy, who also provided sanctuary to a gunman. Others were rounded up by the Panama Defense Force and killed or imprisoned, the State Department officials said.

Much of this information was relayed to Washington shortly after the election but "nothing happened," an American diplomat said. "It was throwing a ball into a pillow." It was not clear, he said, whether the initial field reports from the American Embassy "got through the filter" of Washington's official policy of accepting the election returns as legitimate.

In July, the diplomat added, political officers assigned to the American Embassy in Panama filed a "massive" report that fully detailed the extent of the fraud and provided specific examples from various polling stations.

It was in July, too, that Mr. Barletta flew to Washington for a meeting with

President Reagan in the Oval Office. Photographs of the two men were widely distributed. Officials said the American policy following the election was to ignore the evidence of fraud and emphasize Mr. Barletta's longstanding ties to the United States and his economic expertise in an effort to improve his personal standing.

In October 1984, shortly before Mr. Barletta was inaugurated, the American Embassy in Panama forwarded to Washington yet another detailed report — known in the State Department as a scene setter — in which the extensive evidence of election fraud was clearly reported, according to first-hand sources. That document was provided to Mr. Shultz, as head of the American diplomatic delegation, and to Vice President Bush, who had been expected to also attend the inauguration but did not do so.